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'Fostering Compassionate Communities'

St George's Student Paramedic Blue Light Champion Scheme

Katie Pavoni MCPara, Deputy Course Director and Pastoral Lead for BSc Paramedic Science, Kingston and St Georges University and member of the College of Paramedics Mental Health and Wellbeing Steering Group, and Matt Bayley and Nadia Strappelli, third year paramedic students discuss the importance of peer support for student paramedics.

With one in four people experiencing a mental health challenge at some point in their lives, the importance of raising awareness of emotional health and avenues of support for those in distress cannot be overlooked.

Emergency services personnel are no exception, with recent research from MIND highlighting that 91% of ambulance personnel experience poor wellbeing during their role as a result of a multitude of factors including; exposure to traumatic events, solo working, shift patterns and emotional labour (MIND 2016). Despite this prevalence and the recent drive to increase support, paramedics are still one of the least likely professions to seek help, often believing they would be seen less favourably as a result of a disclosure (MIND 2019).

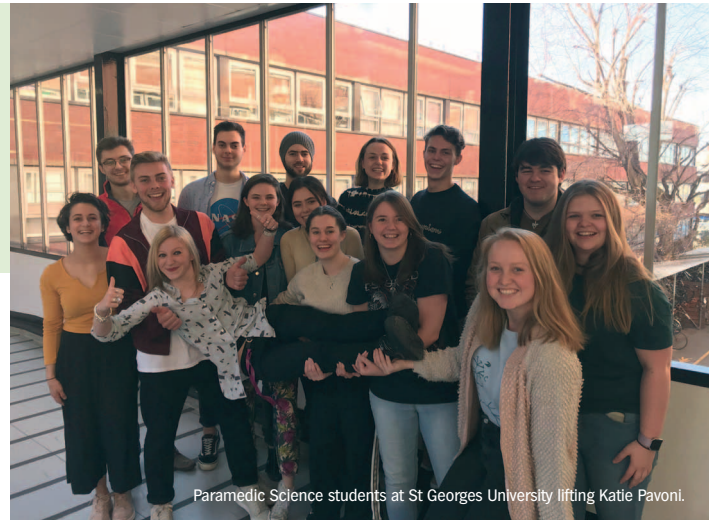
The Blue Light Programme was launched by MIND in 2015 to challenge this stigma related to emergency services mental health and to enable both peer and professional support for individuals in times of difficulty. The Blue Light Champions across all emergency services have made an exceptionally positive contribution and have advocated the important message that we are not alone.

Whilst considerable work is being undertaken nationally to address this amongst registered clinicians, much of which being led by the College of Paramedics' Mental Health and Wellbeing Steering Group, the importance of laying positive foundations within our pre-registration students must be recognised if we are to ensure the long term health of our profession and to achieve a cultural change.

The paramedic department at Kingston and St George's University of London is extremely passionate about this issue and is currently the only undergraduate programme that has a dedicated team of student paramedic Blue Light Champions. These individuals are third-year students, who in collaboration with the department pastoral care lead, provide peer support and encourage positive mental health and wellbeing amongst the student paramedic and wider university community.

This initiative was founded in 2017 and this year the department currently has a team of 14 champions who are inspired to help their colleagues navigate the challenges of both front-line ambulance work and academic study, acknowledging the unique demands of being a student paramedic. Examples of this support include: promoting positive nutrition through pop-up juice bars, mindfulness and coping with stress workshops, and practical advice for managing placements; such as adapting to shift work, emotional resilience and self-care.

In addition, they also provide support with written exams through revision sessions and facilitate an incredibly popular 'de-stress' room for students undertaking practical exams. Here the team is on hand with bean bags, music and an incredibly popular 'tea trolley' to ensure a safe



Paramedic Science students at St Georges University lifting Katie Pavoni.

space for their peers to settle their nerves before their assessment and to relax afterwards with those who can truly empathise with the process and boost their confidence. This has proved to be extremely successful with the lower year students who have remarked on how helpful they have found this opportunity to learn from the experience of the third-years and how it has helped make a challenging day less stressful.

Alongside support to students, the St George's Blue Light Champions also actively promote positive conversations and awareness through their social media channels and carry out a variety of wellbeing events including fundraisers. They also co-design and facilitate our annual 'Emergency Services Mental Health and Wellbeing Conference' with the pastoral care lead which this year was entitled 'YOU Need YOU' and centred around the theme of 'Resilience'.

The conference was supported by the College of Paramedics and was attended by emergency services personnel from all over the UK. The event received extremely positive feedback with a police sergeant stating: "The pastoral care offered and provided to student paramedics was really evident, and what was really inspiring was the care they had for each other as friends and colleagues. It was actually quite moving, and the students brought so much energy to the event."

Speakers included Dr Jennifer Wild and Hjordis Lorenza from the University of Oxford, Jules Lockett from the London Ambulance Service, Jamie Ironmonger an ex-police officer who climbed Everest to raise awareness of mental health, campaigner Ben West and Invictus Games athlete Dan Richards. The event was also attended by Samaritans, Big White Wall Time to Change, Rethink Mental Illness, British Red Cross and The Ambulance Staff Charity who provided information and resources on accessing support services.

The work of the Student Paramedic Blue Light Champions continues to evolve as students recognise the power of their voice and the impact they can have in supporting their peers as they embark upon their journey into the paramedic profession.

It is this message of hope and kindness and an ethos of a compassionate community that we believe will support the resilience of our future clinicians and enable them to look after not only themselves, but their colleagues and ultimately the patients they go on to serve.